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ABSTRACT

The features of an early childhood education demonstration program, Visions for Children, are delineated in this paper. The program was designed to facilitate the intellectual development, boost the academic achievement, and enhance the self-concepts of African-American preschool children. The program implements a curriculum that focuses on language and communication skills, cognitive skills, mathematical concepts, positive self-concept, positive attitudes toward learning, Afro-American and African studies, literacy, psychomotor skills, computer skills, and cultural arts. Features of the model include high affective support, self-concept development, creative expression, and consideration of the politics of holidays. Teaching strategies include body language, use of standard English, use of equal talking time, enrichment of interactions with adults and peers, and use of music in class. A longitudinal, continuing study of the cognitive effects of the program during its first two years indicated that program participants scored higher on six tests during phase 1 than did matched subjects attending a high quality early childhood education center. Control group children scored higher on two tests, and no significant differences were found on nine tests. During phase 2, neither group scored higher than the other on any tests. (RH)

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Visions For Children
African American Early Childhood Education Program

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Short Form of Title:
Visions for Children
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Visions For Children

African American Early Childhood Education Program

Abstract

This is a report of the design of an early childhood education demonstration program whose goal is to facilitate the intellectual development, academic achievement, and enhance the self-concepts of African American preschool children. The features of the program are delineated. The research questions and the child development measures that are being used for longitudinal evaluation of the program are listed and described. Baseline data are reported for the first two phases of child testing.

VISIONS FOR CHILDREN

AFRICAN AMERICAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM

Visions for Children is a preschool program which emphasizes the special characteristics of Afro-American children, offering a teaching method and curriculum which encourages children to learn the information and skills necessary for upward mobiity, career achievement and financial independence in the American mainstream. At the same time, they feel pride in their own ethnic culture and are able to identify with and contribute to the development of their people.

This program is based on the model described in Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles, (Hale-Benson, 1986). It is funded by the Cleveland Foundation. A distinctive feature is the emphasis on teaching young children cognitive skills while strengthening their self-esteem and identity as Afro-Americans.

The teaching method emphasizes Afro-American culture and integrates it in all of its diversity throughout the curriculum. The children learn about Africa and their rich cultural heritage; they learn about Afro-American and African arts and crafts; they listen to folktales and stories written by Afro-American writers; they listen to music and learn about musicians that emerge from Black culture; they learn about heroes in Black history such as Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr.

In sum, the children in this program are surrounded with messages that get them started on the right track in realizing that there is pride in being beautiful Black children who can hold their own in a competitive society.

Visions for Children emphasizes the development of cognitive skills, such as reasoning, memory, problem-solving, creativity, and language skills. Progress is assessed using both teacher-made and standardized instruments. Even though standardized instruments can contain inherent biases toward minority children, a goal of this program is to de-mystify these tests for parents and to help the children perform well on such measures.

There is a strong correlation between language facility and performing well on standardized measures in the professional work world. Therefore, Visions for Children's focus is on language skills. This includes expressive as well as receptive language. Too often children receive language through listening, but do not have enough opportunities to engage in expressive language. Expressive language includes holding conversations with adults, telling stories from pictures, engaging in socio-dramatic play, and responding to questions in complete sentences.

Visions for Children Curriculum

1. Language/communication skills. Language-related skills are critical in the education of children. A high

correlation exists between elementary school reading achievement test scores and standardized college admissions tests. This correlation suggests that a huge proportion of what is being measured in "intelligence" and "achievement" tests are language/communication skills.

Black children are very expressive in the use of oral language. However, there is a need to broaden their skills to include those that are called for as a precursor to reading and writing proficiency. Therefore, speaking, listening, labeling, storytelling, chanting, imitating, and reciting are encouraged.

The children are engaged in literacy activities that foster higher order thinking skills. Computers are used in combination with the Language Experience Approach in which the children compose stories and learn to read words that occur naturally in their vocabulary. Emphasis is placed on idea generation as a precursor to writing skills.

2. Cognitive skills. There are cognitive skills that lay the foundation for more advanced intellectual activity that should be strengthened in the early years. There are age appropriate activities that are designed to strengthen the child's abilities in the areas of memory, reasoning, problem-solving, creativity and play.

3. Mathematical concepts. Black children are able to master a wide range of mathematical skills in their everyday lives (like computing baseball batting averages), but they have difficulty demonstrating their skills in the

classroom. Therefore, emphasis is placed on developing mathematical proficiency in this model program. The children learn about sets, seriation, time, measurements, and other mathematical concepts.

4. Positive self-concept and positive attitude toward learning and school. This affective goal is included as an overall curricular emphasis because children should not be imbued with cognitive skills at the expense of a consideraton for the way they feel about themselves, the teacher, learning, and school. Educators must be sensitive to the many as yet unidentified ways in which Black children are "turned off" and "pushed out" of school.

Providing children with successful experiences, enabling them to be self-motivating and to establish a life-long love of learning is equally as important as helping them perform well on achievement tests. It is also important to help children develop social skills which include, manners, courtesy, positive personal relationships, and the ability to resolve conflicts non-violently.

Disciplinary practices are designed to teach the children how to reason. Too often children are told what not to do but they are not taught how to determine the proper behavior for themselves. Disciplinary situations are opportunities for teaching. The purpose of discipline is to achieve self-management.

5. Afro-American studies. Afro-American studies is a focal point and is also integrated throughout the curriculum

of this model. Every opportunity is used to acquaint the children with the culture, cosmology, and history of Africans of the diaspora. As a result of this exposure, the children have more information about Black culture and increased pride in their racial heritage.

A purpose of this curriculum is to widen the world of the children and provide them with a variety of experiences. The curriculum includes countless topics and information drawn from numerous disciplines that are presented on the level of the child. The curriculum includes science, art, music, creative movement, geography, nutrition, history, social studies, economics, literature, and philosophy. However, these areas of the curriculum are taught in an integrated manner through field trips, speakers, movies, units and incidental learning.

6. African studies. The children are exposed to aspects of African culture appropriate to their level of understanding -- foods, geography, fashions, music, instruments, songs, poetry, names, history and art. An important part of fostering a positive self-identity is creating pride in the homeland of Black children's ancestors, Africa. There is a need to counteract the myths and stereotypes perpetuated by the mass media about Africa. The emphasis in African studies is West Africa. However, a monthly theme is devoted to Egypt. Afro-Caribbean culture is explored through monthly themes on Jamaica and Haiti.

7. Literacy. Reading readiness is an important part of

Visions for Children. The children are constantly surrounded by opportunities to learn to read. Items in the environment that have meaning for them are labeled. Words are written on bulletin boards, papers, and walls so that they will learn to recognize words in an incidental, meaningful way.

8. Psychomotor Skills. An important feature of the program is the development of gross and fine motor skills. Frequent opportunities are provided for physical release and for the children to teach themselves through play. Movement activities are used frequently in the learning process. The classroom is organized to permit maximum child movement with as much self-direction as is practical. An indoor exercise and play area is provided as well as an outdoor playground. The children are also taught creative movement and African dance and drumming.

9. Computer Skills. The children are taught how to operate computers. Software is selected that emphasizes the interactive capabilities of computers. They also practice basic skills and produce artwork.

10. Cultural Arts. An important feature of the program is an emphasis on the cultural arts including music, creative movement, sculpture, painting, arts and crafts, woodworking, dramatics, and poetry. The children take monthly field trips to places such as the Art Museum to see exhibits of African masks, the Afro-American Museum to see photographic exhibits, and plays in the community. They are also exposed to Afro-American and Anglo-American cultural events.

Features of the Model

1. High affective support. The classrooms have a high adult-child ratio, small-group learning, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous grouping (family style). All of the teachers teach all of the children in a kind of extended family system. The children are grouped into African ethnic groups and rotate among the teachers. All of the children are taught by all of the teachers in an extended family system. This permits the teachers to collectively evaluate the children. Frequent touching, lap-sitting, holding hands, and hugging are encouraged.

2. Self-concept development. Children's self-confidence is fostered through frequent compliments, praise, displays of work, performances, open houses, and regular successful experiences. Care is given that children's work is often displayed.

3. Creative expression. Opportunities for all types of creative expression permeate the curriculum. The visual, dramatic, and musical arts are encouraged.

4. Enrichment experiences. Monthly field trips are planned that correlate with the theme for the month. However, a variety of "teachers" from the community are regularly brought into the classroom to teach special skills.

5. Holidays. Attention is given to the politics of holidays, particularly as they affect the history of Black and other oppressed people in America. For example, Thanksgiving is not a purely religious holiday. Most

discussions of Thanksgiving convey the point of view of the "pilgrims". The perspectives of Native Americans and Afro-Americans are generally ignored. The focus of holidays is be celebrations, commemorations and role models who revolve around events and historical figures pivotal in Afro-American history. Among the events celebrated are:

Emancipation Proclamation

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Juneteenth

Malcolm X's Birthday

Kwanzaa

14th Amendment to the Constitution

Visions for Children Teaching Strategies

1. Body language. Black children are proficient in nonverbal communication. Our teachers are sensitive in their use of gesture, eye-contact, and other nonverbal cues.

2. Standard English. Standard English is modeled, and children's speech is informally (in a low-key, non-punitive manner) corrected. This modeling and correcting are very important in early childhood because if a child does not "hear" certain sounds and develop the ability to reproduce them early in life, it becomes more difficult to change speech patterns later. More research is needed into the instructional needs of Black English speakers; however, one fact is clear: speaking standard English is a skill needed by Black children for upward mobility in American society and it

should be taught in early childhood. At no time is baby talk spoken. The teachers speak in complete sentences and encourage the children to do so.

3. Equal talking time. Teacher "talk" is regulated to the approximate amount of child talk. Laura Lein (1975) found in her study of Black migrant children that the children spoke more frequently and used more complex sentences outside of school with peers and parents. This phenomenon occurred because the peers and parents talked about the same amount as the children, who spoke least to the teacher in school, seemingly because the teacher talked a greater proportion of the time.

The teacher encourage the children to talk conversationally, in recitation, and creatively.

4. Enriching interactions with adults and peers. An emphasis is given to small group learning and hands-on contact with the teacher. Black children benefit from enriched interactions with adults and peers.

5. A variety of learning activities. Children are taught with a varied format for learning activities -- movement, games, music, prose, poetry.

6. Music in the classroom. Afro-American music permeates the curriculum. Jazz, rhythm and blues, spirituals, and folk music is played throughout the day (whenever it is practical). Black children are exposed to music in their homes, and it is relaxing to them. Some teachers have reported that discipline problems decreased and

productivity increased when music was played in classrooms with Black children (Personal conversations with teachers in Storrs, Connecticut). The children are also taught about the recording artists.

Visions for Children Equipment and Materials

1. Play equipment. Many studies have found that Black children are more kinesthetic than white children, have a broader range of movements and need to expend energy more constantly (Hale-Benson, 1986). Also, physical activity and sports are encouraged in Afro-American culture. Therefore, the children are encouraged to develop their large muscles utilizing the indoor and outdoor play equipment in the center.

2. Learning materials. Open-ended learning materials are utilized: clay, water play, sandboxes, manipulatives, socio-dramatic play props (dress-up clothes, fabric for creative wrapping). Learning games are chosen that emphasize challenge, not competition.

Research Design

The research component of Visions for Children was funded for two years by the Council for Economic Opportunities of Greater Cleveland. It is presently funded by the Cleveland Foundation.

All children enrolled in Visions for Children are tested each year on the child development measures described below.

A control group of children is also tested. All children in the study will be tested each year as they matriculate in the primary grades. These data will be analyzed longitudinally to establish the long term effects of the program and to revise the curriculum based on these outcomes.

The data below are for the first two years of testing. Kindergarten scores for the first cohort are reported in this paper. These scores provide information on the cognitive abilities of the children at the initiation of the study. These data will be useful as we measure changes in test scores as the children progress through the program and elementary school.

Research Questions of the Study and Relationship to Visions for Children Child Development Measures

Listed below are the research questions and the measures of the study based upon a review of the tests and measurements literature and a national consultation with experts in the field.

1. Does exposure to the Visions for Children program result in measurable gains in the cognitive abilities of Afro-American children?

The McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities (MSCA)

This is a measure of children's overall cognitive skills. It is an individually administered test of general cognitive abilities which can be used with children from 2 1/2 to 8 years of age; administration time for children under 5 years of age is approximately 45-50 minutes. The

test consists of 18 individual subtests, which form six scales: verbal, perceptual-performance, quantitative, memory, motor, and an overall general cognitive index (GCI - made up of the verbal, quantitative, and perceptual-performance scales). While there is considerable, ongoing debate about bias in IQ measures with Black children, the test still provides useful information about children's overall cognitive abilities.

The MSCA has many assets which counterbalance some of the liabilities of using IQ measures with Black children. (The majority of my reviewers do not call it an IQ measure). In general, the psychometric properties of the MSCA are good. The standardization sample for the test is excellent and fairly recent. In addition, validity and reliability are acceptable. Another strength of the MSCA is that it is appealing to children. Materials are colorful and stimulating, and the individual subtests are relatively short so that the children do not tend to have difficulties attending to task. Also, unlike other measures, the MSCA contains a motor component, with both gross and fine motor tasks.

2. Does attendance at the Visions for Children program result in Afro-American children becoming more in-group oriented? There is a tendency for Black children to prefer white physical traits and to attribute more positive characteristics to white people than to Black people. A major question of the study is whether participating in an

early childhood education program with an Afro-American cultural component reverses that trend.

Preschool Racial Attitudes Measure (PRAM II)

This is a picture test that is designed to assess racial bias among pre-literate children. It has excellent reliability and validity.

3. Are there distinctive styles that characterize the behavior of Afro-American children in classrooms? There is evidence in the literature that there is cultural dissonance between Afro-American culture and the culture of the schools (Rashid 1981). This measure will be administered as a first step to examining relevant dimensions of classroom behavior.

Report of Child Behavior by Earl Schaeffer

This is a very recently developed instrument that has the virtue of evaluating more normal and less pathological behavior than many of the other instruments that are available. Many of the others are seeking to identify juvenile delinquency rather than normal classroom adjustment. They result in being biased against Black male children.

4. Does participation in the Visions for Children program empower Afro-American children and enhance their self-esteem?

Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance

This is a self-concept measure that examines perceived competence and social acceptance. It has four subscales: cognitive competence, physical competence, peer acceptance, and maternal acceptance. Susan Harter, the author has done

some excellent work in the area of self-concept for older children, and this is a recently developed scale for preschool and kindergarten children.

5. Does participation in the Visions for Children program enhance the ability of Afro-American children to engage in sustained effort for delayed rewards?

Delay of Gratification

A technique developed by Conrad Schwarz is used. Teachers rate the children on their ability to defer gratification, an important skill needed for achievement.

6. Does participation in the Visions for Children program result in measurable gains in reading readiness skills useful for success in kindergarten?

Achievement -- Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test

This will be an outcome measure for the children entering kindergarten. The test is a group administered, multiple-skill battery which takes approximately 80-90 minutes for children to complete. There are two levels available, with Level 1 being appropriate for the children beginning kindergarten. The kindergarten version of this test was recommended over the kindergarten version of the Stanford Achievement test. The Metropolitan is more appealing and takes less time to administer.

The test is used extensively, and has good organization and clarity. In addition, a great deal of psychometric work has been carried out which demonstrates substantial reliability and validity of the test. In general, the test

can provide useful screening information pertaining to achievement-oriented skills useful upon school entrance.

7. Does participation in the Visions for Children program result in measurable gains in achievement-oriented skills?

Achievement - Stanford Achievement Test

This is an outcome measure for the children entering first grade and at the completion of each year of the primary grades. The test is a group administered, multiple-skill battery. There are two levels available. Stanford Early School Achievement Test (SESAT) 1 is generally used for kindergarten and SESAT 2, is generally used for first grade.

The test takes approximately 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours for children to complete. It is recommended that it be given in two to three sittings. The test is used extensively, and has good organization and clarity. In addition, a great deal of psychometric work has been carried out which demonstrates substantial reliability and validity of the test. In general, the test can provide useful information pertaining to achievement oriented skills.

Description of the Control Group

The control group for the study is a day care center located in Cleveland, Ohio. This center has provided child care services in the Cleveland Clinic area for 17 years. The hours of operation are 6:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, year round. The center serves families with children ages 18 months - 8 years including full day kindergarten,

after school and holiday care for school-age children, and a toddler program for children still in diapers.

Characteristics of the Children

An important consideration in selecting a control group was matching Visions children on the dimension of socioeconomic status. This is an important variable for Black children. Without such controls, it could be argued that any differences in the achievement of the children was due to socioeconomic characteristics of the families.

We used the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status which creates a score based upon parent education, parent occupation, sex and marital status.

An overall t-test was conducted on age of the subjects in both groups and the Hollingshead scores to determine whether the two groups of children were comparable.

The overall average age of the Visions children was 47.13 months and the average age of the control group children was 45.00 months. (Only children who fell within the age groups served at Visions were selected for the control group.) There was no significant difference in age. The data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Age

Location	N	Average	Std Dev	T

Age in Months

Control	40	45.00	11.15	
Visions	51	47.13	7.90	-1.03 ns

The overall Hollingshead score for the Visions children was 42.05. The overall Hollingshead score for the control group children was 41.95. There was no significant difference in the scores between the two groups. The data are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Hollingshead Social Class Measure

Location	N	Average Score	Std Dev	T
Control	40	41.95	10.09	
Visions	51	42.05	14.98	-0.04 ns

SUMMARY OF DATA ANALYSIS

A summary of the measures administered during phases one and two reveals that the Visions children scored higher on 6

tests during phase one and the control group children scored higher on 2. There were 9 tests on which there there was no significant difference in the scores. During phase 2 neither the Visions children nor the control children scored higher on any tests. There were non-significant differences between the groups on all seventeen of the tests administered.

Gain scores refer to the tests on which the children who were tested in both phases 1 and 2 achieved gains in their scores in the second testing. The Visions children had higher gains scores on 2 tests, the control group children had higher gains scores on 4, and there was a non-significant difference between the two groups on eleven of the tests administered.

On the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test, there were no tests on which the Visions children scored higher. The control group children scored higher on 3 tests. There was a non-significant difference between the groups on 6 tests.

The first two rounds of testing are considered to be baseline measures because the program was in the initial developmental phases. Future gains will be evaluated against these scores. The control group was selected because it is a quality early childhood education center. It was felt that any gains demonstrated by the Visions for Children project would only be noteworthy if it was compared to an established, quality program. The control group program has been in operation for 17 years. The staff in the control

group also has a higher level of training than the Visions staff. Therefore, the high number of test scores with a non-significant difference is a very good beginning.

Project Outcomes

Visions for Children is designed to be a demonstration program that can serve as an early childhood education model for Afro-American children. A product will be a published curriculum that has been field tested. It will contain a bibliography of materials that can serve as a resource for programs based on this model.

Plans are underway for the development of a companion component that can be used for parent education to complement the preschool curriculum.

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